

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-11

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-14 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
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R 281351Z SEP 78
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9855
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY LONDON
DIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 5668

DIA FOR DB-3C1

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: MILI, PINT, LE
SUBJECT: PROSPECTS UNCERTAIN FOR NEW DEFENSE BILL

REF: (A) DIA WASHDC 142050Z SEP 78, (B) BEIRUT A-67

1. BEGIN SUMMARY: THE NEW DEFENSE BILL IS IN TROUBLE. THE GOVERNMENT HAS ACTED TO POSTPONE DISCUSSION OF THE MEASURE, REPORTEDLY BECAUSE ITS SPONSORS REFUSED TO SPECIFY THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN, AND AUTHORITY OF, THE PROPOSED MILITARY COUNCIL AND THE ARMY COMMANDER. THE OPPOSING DEMANDS OF MARONITES AND MUSLIMS OVER WHO WILL ACTUALLY CONTROL THE ARMY ARE THE CAUSE OF THE LATEST BLOCK TO PRODUCING A
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NEW DEFENSE LAW. END SUMMARY.

2. THE NEW DEFENSE BILL (REFAIR) APPEARS TO BE IN TROUBLE AS TIME FOR ITS CONSIDERATION NEARS. ON SEPT. 26 FUAD LAHOUD, THE HEAD OF THE PARLIAMENTARY SUBCOMMITTEE THAT IS PREPARING THE BILL, LAUNCHED A PUBLIC ATTACK AGAINST SARKIS FOR "UNWITTINGLY" STANDING IN THE WAY OF THE BILL'S PASSAGE. SARKIS HAD ASKED

THAT THE PREROGATIVES OF THE COMMANDER OF THE ARMY UNDER THE NEW LAW BE SPECIFIED. WHEN SARKIS WAS TOLD HE WOULD RECEIVE THAT INFORMATION AFTER THE DEFENSE AND ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEES, UNDER WHICH THE SUBCOMMITTEE WAS FORMED, HAD COMPLETED THEIR WORK ON THE BILL, HE FORCED A POSTPONEMENT OF FURTHER DISCUSSION, THE PRESS REPORTED. (NOTE: THE ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE IS ONE OF THE TWO PARENT COMMITTEES, NOT THE "HOUSE" COMMITTEE AS STATED IN REFAIR.)

3. IN A CONVERSATION WITH EMBASSY FSL ON SEPT. 27, LAHOUD SAID THAT IN THE PAST HE HAD DEFENDED THE PRESIDENT AGAINST CHARGES THAT HE WAS UNDER SYRIAN PRESSURE NOT TO REFORM THE ARMY. NOW, LAHOUD SAID, HE IS NOT SO SURE. (COMMENT: LAHOUD'S OWN MOTIVES FOR SUPPORTING THE BILL ARE SOMEWHAT SUSPECT, HOWEVER, SINCE HE HAS PUSHED IT IN PART BECAUSE OF A PERSONAL FEUD WITH FELLOW MARONITE AND NLP LEADER, CAMILLE CHAMOUN, WHO IS BITTERLY OPPOSED TO ANY CHANGE IN THE STATUS QUO ANTE BELLUM STRUCTURE OF THE ARMY. END COMMENT.)

4. LAHOUD ALSO TOLD OUR FSL THAT PRIME MINISTER HOSS AND DEFENSE MINISTER BOUTROS HAVE BEEN DIRECTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CURRENT IMPASSE. AT THE SUBCOMMITTEE MEETING ON SEPTEMBER 26, BOUTROS PUBLICLY EXPRESSED SERIOUS RESERVATIONS WITH REGARD TO THE RESPONSIBILITIES TO BE ALLOCATED TO THE MILITARY COUNCIL. ON SEPT. 27, LAHOUD CHALLENGED BOUTROS TO DEBATE WITH HIM DEFENSE ISSUES ON TELEVISION AND CHARGED THE GOVERNMENT WITH CONFIDENTIAL

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WEAKNESS AND COWARDICE IN ITS HANDLING OF THE ARMY BILL.

5. ACCORDING TO GREEK ORTHODOX DEPUTY MUNIR ABU FADIL, THE GOVERNMENT HAS PREPARED AN ALTERNATE BILL. HE ALSO SAID THAT SARKIS, HOSS, AND BOUTROS WERE TO DISCUSS THE BILL AGAIN.

6. COMMENT: AS SUGGESTED IN REFAIR, IT WILL BE NO EASY FEAT TO PRODUCE AN ARMY BILL THAT WILL SATISFY MUSLIM COMPLAINTS THAT THE MARONITES DOMINATE THE ARMY BY GIVING VETO AUTHORITY TO A CONFESSIONALLY BALANCED MILITARY COMMITTEE, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME CONTINUING TO VEST BROAD POWERS IN THE ARMY COMMANDER (A MARONITE UNDER TERMS OF THE NATIONAL PACT). DESPITE THE FACT THAT THE GOVERNMENT AND THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES REACHED AGREEMENT ON A NUMBER OF PROVISIONS EARLIER THIS MONTH, WHO WILL ACTUALLY CONTROL THE ARMY REMAINS AN ESSENTIAL STICKING POINT. IT NOW APPEARS THAT THE OPPOSING GROUPS HAVE DECIDED TO DIG IN BEFORE THE BILL CAN GET OUT OF COMMITTEE AND THAT LAHOUD'S EARLIER EXPRESSED OPTIMISM THAT THE BILL COULD BECOME LAW IN THE NEAR FUTURE IS FADING.
PARKER

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